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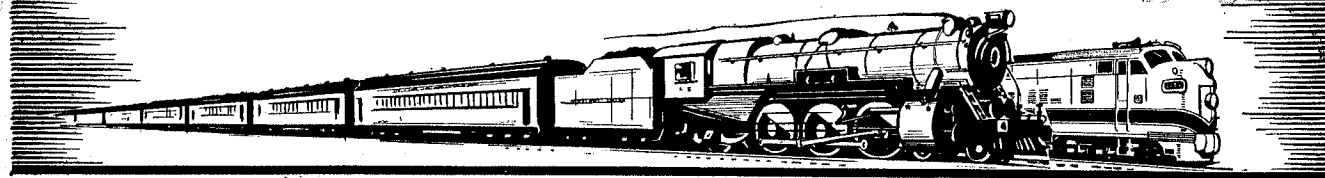


NEW YORK HARBOR SCENE

French liner "Liberte" arriving at New York City, as seen from the Jersey Central Lines ferry slips at Jersey City, N. J.

Lady Luck's Own Alfred

By JACK RITCHIE



WHEN I had the boys started on morning batting practice, I stomped into the office to study the reports on the pitcher they were supposed to send me.

After the miserable way we started the season, we were going to need him bad.

Wally Matson, the general manager, looked kind of nervous when he handed me the papers.

I got a little past the name, Alfred C. Blaine. Won 15. Lost 3. Then I came to the earned run average. It was 8.98.

"Lousy typist," I said. "Look here. It says Earned Run Average, 8.98."

Wally took the cigar out of his mouth and laughed weakly. "That's no mistake."

I looked at the report again. "But he won fifteen."

"That's right."

I started boiling. "Just what kind of a screwy deal is this! How can a guy win fifteen with an earned run average like that. What is he, a freak?"

"Well," said Wally. "In a way he is, because those figures don't lie." He put the cigar back in his mouth. "He's lucky."

"Lucky!" My blood pressure was beginning to zoom. "I don't care how lucky he is. We're in fifth place now. What I want is a pitcher, not a good luck charm."

"The papers picked us to win the pennant," he reminded me. "You know we probably will."

"Not the way we're going now," I yelled. "So help me, I need a pitcher. Maybe two. I could use a second baseman. An outfielder who can hit."

I could feel the top of my head getting red and warm. "Come to think of it, what I need right now is a whole new team."

"Now, now," Wally said, raising his hand. "You know you've got good boys. You can afford to try Blaine."

"Pennants are won and lost by one game," I reminded him darkly.

During the next few days my temper improved because we picked up a full game, putting us only half a game from the first division. So when Alfred Blaine showed up I only scowled at him.

He was built all right for a ball player. About six feet, one. And his poundage was around 185. But it was the look about him that got me.

If there was an ounce of self-confidence in him, it didn't show. Well, I thought, if I allowed nine runs a game I wouldn't look too self-confident either.

I cleared my throat loudly, getting ready to give him my special brand of welcome, and he jumped.

When he stopped being flustered, he said, "I'm your new pitcher, sir. But don't expect too much of me."

That rocked me a little, but I pulled myself together and saw to it that he was issued a uniform. Then I took him out to the practice field and introduced him around. Some of the boys, after shaking his limp hand, looked at me with wonder in their eyes.

I let him warm up for fifteen minutes and felt shocked as I watched him. Dog-gone if he didn't seem like he was apologizing for every pitch he made.

I put Chet Mitchell, our regular center fielder, in the batter's box.

"Now let's see some of your stuff against a batter," I yelled to Alfred. "Try your fast one a couple of times."

"Yes, sir," he said, and nodded his head.

It wasn't a bad pitch. Came in there with plenty of steam. I couldn't see anything wrong with it except that Chet laced it into left field for what would have been a clean single if we had been playing a game.

Alfred—you just couldn't call him Al—pitched about a dozen fast balls. They were all good ones, but Chet was batting around .750. He even poked two over the long left field fence.

Next, I had Alfred try his curve and then his slider. I even had him throwing slow ones. They were all good, even beautiful, until they got to the plate. The crack of the bat on the ball came regularly as the morning mail.

"I just can't help it, Mr. Pierce," Alfred said in a quavery voice. "I'm doing the best I can."

"Don't let it worry you," I sneered. "With you on the mound we won't need to pay money for a catcher." I rubbed my hand over my eyes. "But come to think of it, we'll lose money on the balls hit over the fence."

Maybe Chet was just having a good day, I thought. I pulled him out and put in Reeves. He did about as well as Mitchell. So I tried Harrison. Then I went down the batting order.

The boys were all gathered along the base lines looking awed. Albert finally got a ball past Jacobs and they burst into a spontaneous cheer.

Jacobs, who hadn't batted over .250 in the last three years, then proceeded to slam four long balls against the left field fence.

I slammed my cap on the ground. "Get out of that batter's box!" I roared.

He tossed his bat aside and walked away grinning.

I got behind the catcher and had Alfred

throw a dozen assorted pitches across the empty plate. This was beginning to get me. There wasn't a thing wrong with those pitches, I swear.

After a while of watching I went over and picked up a bat. I haven't played ball in ten years and some of the boys snickered, but I had to find out for myself.

"All right," my voice sounded desperate. "Just a few more."

Alfred sighed, wound up and let the pill go. It was a curve and I slapped it into center field. Next I hit one to right. The third might have been only a fly ball, if the center fielder were fast enough. The fourth pitch I smacked over the right field wall.

I let the bat drop out of my hands and walked away with my head down.

Wally was standing on the sidelines looking uncomfortable. He glanced out at Alfred and shook his head. "Still," he said not too hopefully, "he's supposed to be lucky."

The next six days went fine. We won five out of six and moved into fourth place. I kept Alfred in the bull pen warming up for most of every game, but I shied away from putting him on the mound.

That seemed to be all right with Alfred, but Wally was fretting. He pointed out that the owner wanted to see Alfred play. He also reminded me that a manager with a wife and three daughters to support ought to have sense enough to keep the owner happy.

"I'm winning, ain't I," I snarled.

But Wally became very firm.

Tuesday was a two-night double header. We took the first, 5 to 3. In the second we started off with a bang, getting three in our half of the first and we were never headed.

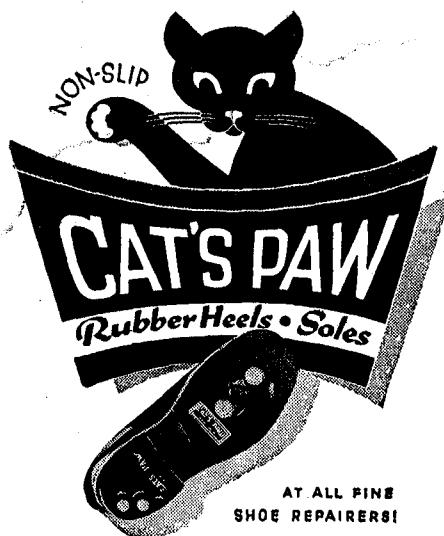
By the time we got to the Spartan's half of the ninth we led, 8 to 1. Their first man up hit an easy pop fly to Reeves on second for the first out.

Now is the time to put Alfred in, I thought. Here we are, leading by seven runs. There's one out and the bottom half of their lineup is due to bat. The Spartan's are bound to be twenty games out of first place by the time the season's finished.

"What can I lose," I said to myself. "Nobody could blow a lead like we got."

Patterson, who'd been doing a fine job, didn't like the idea of being taken out. But he didn't make much of a fuss when he found out I was going to replace him with Alfred. He even seemed downright fascinated by the idea.

Alfred took his warm-ups, hitched up



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his trousers, and waited sadly for the batter to step into the box. Wiley, the Spartan's third baseman, welcomed the first pitch by turning it into a double down the left field foul line.

I started getting uneasy, but the next man grounded out, Wiley going from second to third.

With two outs, I leaned back in the dugout and lit my cigar.

The next man up let two balls go by him and then singled to bring Wiley home. Another single followed and then Alfred walked Parks, their weakest hitter, to load the bags.

What the heck, I thought, he's got seven men behind him and a chance for an out at any base. Just the same, I began to get nervous.

Carver, the Spartan center fielder, lifted one out of the park, but it was foul.

I felt relieved that Carver had that long ball out of his system without hurting us. But on the next pitch he hit another long one. Only this time it was fair by three or four yards.

His homer cleared the bases and now the score was 8 to 6. I sighed and walked out to the mound. The only thing to do was to yank Alfred out of there.

I expected the usual argument. However, when I got within talking distance, Alfred said plaintively, "I guess you'd better take me out, huh? I'm not doing so good."

That made me stubborn. "Heck, no," I snarled at him. "I'm just here to give you some friendly encouragement, you bum. You're staying in." I patted him on the back so the crowd could see how much faith I had in him.

On the way back to the dugout I scowled up at the broadcasting booth where the owner sat watching the game. I couldn't make out his face, but I hoped he was as unhappy as me.

The next Spartan batter greeted Alfred with a single. Somehow I wasn't a bit surprised. The triple that followed and made the score 8 to 7 didn't surprise me either.

The fans were getting loud and hollering for me to take Alfred out. I closed my eyes and waited. Come hell or high water, lose or win, I was going to keep him in there. It might be worth losing the game if I could ship Alfred back to Class D.

With my eyes closed I heard the crack of the bat. It was a solid one. This is it, I said to myself, it'll clear the fence.

I took my hand away from my face and opened my eyes. Chet Mitchell was running toward the flag pole faster than I thought he could. He just about climbed the pole, but when he came down he had the ball nice and snug in his glove.

I wiped the sweat from my face. 8 to 7. I couldn't quite believe it, but we hadn't lost the game. It was no miracle, of course, but with Alfred doing the pitching it sure seemed like it.

When Alfred trotted off the field, I said to him, "You had me worried. I thought sure we'd lose that one."

He tossed his glove to the bat boy. "Oh, I hardly ever lose. But," and he shook his head sadly, "it's just how I win that gets me down."

For the next week I took no chances. I saved a regular place on the bench where he could watch the games, but I wouldn't let him touch a baseball except in practice.

Finally Wally came down to the field before game time one evening. He shuffled his feet around, making conversation for a while, and then he came out with it.

"The owner wants you to give Alfred a starting assignment. Tonight, as a matter of fact."

I stared at him. "After what happened the last time? What's the matter, is he crazy? I refuse to do it." I folded my arms and stuck out my jaw.

"Well," he said, rather pointedly, "you could always dig ditches."

When you like your job and the money it brings, and when you've got a wife and three daughters who like to eat, and when you got nothing against eating good yourself, a remark like that makes an impression.

"All right," I stormed. "But it'll be murder. I'll keep him out there pitching for the full nine innings. No matter what happens," I added meaningfully.

The game was a nightmare, like I expected. I blew my top half a dozen times and my blood pressure hit a new high. I was tempted to jerk Alfred out of the game like I've never been tempted before, but I kept him in to the bitter end.

Sure, we won! But take a good look

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at the score—16 to 14. That's right, 16 to 14.

After that performance, I tried to keep Alfred on the bench. Any fool could see that the boy was not a hurler, but then Wally was on my neck again.

"I can't help it," he complained when I exploded. "But that's what the owner wants—a regular starting assignment for Alfred. Alfred seems to be a favorite of his."

I ranted and raved, but what could I do? Feeling like a martyr, I promoted Alfred to a steady mound job.

He won! I've got to admit that. However, the scores that were posted looked like those for football games. The first game he tucked under his belt ended 12 to 9. The second 15 to 14. Then 9 to 8. And the day he pitched real good, 8 to 6.

Still, he caught on with the fans. You can talk about your pitchers' battles, but what the customers really like to see is that pill knocked around. And that's what they got until it came out of their ears.

And the boys on the team liked him, too. Not only did he win the games that pushed us into second place by the middle of August, but their batting averages gained a few points every time Alfred was on the mound.

Me? My ulcers acted up whenever he pitched, but like I said, he did win games. Once in a while I'd even give him a kind word. All in all, I was almost happy.

Then my daughter Kathy started coming to the games.

It was after one of our road trips. We came back with a stronger grip on second place and only four games out of first.

Alfred was pitching the first game of a Sunday double header and going his usual great guns. We were behind right from the start.

After Dukes, the Wrens catcher, poled one into the bleachers, I turned away from the field in the hope of seeing something more pleasant in the opposite direction.

My daughter sat in a box seat along the third base line. Kathy was with one of her horde of beaus; I think it was young Fred Johnson. Not that it matters, he doesn't play baseball.

Now my daughter's what they call whistle bait. She's nineteen and got blonde hair and violet eyes. There she takes after her mother. Also she's smart as a whip. That's where she takes after me.

She likes swimming and horseback riding and all that sort of stuff. The one thing she's never been interested in is baseball.

I rubbed my eyes to make sure I'd seen right and then I thought about it for a while. I couldn't come up with any sensible answer, so I shrugged and turned back to the game.

There were plenty of times when I had the usual urge to pull Alfred out of the game, but I gritted my teeth and controlled myself.

We came into the home half of the ninth four runs behind, 12 to 8. But the old luck worked again and the boys picked up the five runs we needed to win.

Somehow I could never get used to it, and so by the time the last runs crossed

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the plate my stomach was quivering with nervousness. I swallowed a couple of pills and strolled over to where my daughter was sitting.

"I thought I once heard you say you wouldn't be caught dead in a ball park," I said.

"Why, Daddy," she said, her eyes innocent, "I never realized before what a fascinating game baseball is. When that curly-haired man scored a field goal, I was simply thrilled."

"And now," I said sarcastically, "I suppose you want to meet that curly-haired cute little rascal."

"Oh, not him," she said sweetly. "He's really not my type. Why don't you introduce me to that man who kept throwing the ball all the time?"

"Alfred!" I was incredulous. "I got two dozen men on my roster and you want to meet Alfred!"

"Now, Daddy," she said. "Don't be difficult."

I regarded her suspiciously before I whistled to Alfred and waved him over. After the introductions, my daughter's eyes sparkled with admiration as she said, "Why, Mr. Blaine, Daddy's been telling me so many nice things about you."

That was a complete lie, but Alfred swallowed it without chewing. He started to get red in the face, but it was all with pleasure.

Condescendingly, my daughter turned to me. "Daddy, dear," she said, "don't you have to start a ball game or something."

I frowned as I looked at her. She had that same look in her eyes that her mother had the first time I met her.

"You let that boy alone," I said.

Neither one of them paid the slightest attention to me, so I went back to the dugout and brooded. This is dangerous, I thought. Any little thing can change Alfred's luck, and Kathy might be it.

Every once in a while I'd look their way and find them still talking. Alfred acted like he could talk forever.

I growled and tried to keep my mind on the second game. I used three pitchers, but it didn't do any good. We lost.

My humor got more sour that night when Alfred dropped over to call on Kathy. I took the newspaper out into the kitchen and read the sports pages. My wife said, "Such a nice boy," and then left the room hurriedly when she saw my face.

Alfred seemed to change in the next week. He still looked foolish when he was standing around just thinking, but otherwise he seemed to be building up some kind of self-confidence.

At the end of the week when I was bawling him out for not working harder, he had the nerve to give me some back-talk.

Imagine that! After all the patience, kindness, and understanding I'd given that boy. Why, I treated him just like a son. I was so shocked I almost forgot to give him a good chewing out.

His self-confidence wasn't the only thing that changed. Alfred started get-

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ting a new zip into his curves and his fast ball came in there like a comet. Edwards, who does our receiving, was beginning to lose the smirk he had on his face whenever Alfred was doing the tossing.

He won his next two games, something we'd come to expect. But the scores were something new! 6 to 4, and then 3 to 2. He allowed only six hits in that one and walked only three.

"Well," I said to myself, "maybe this boy'll turn into a pitcher yet." Of course, I admitted to myself, he needs more of my counsel, guidance and encouragement.

Then one night as I was reading the paper in the kitchen, Alfred came in and stood there. He seemed about as uncertain as he had the first time I'd seen him.

I tried to help him along, kind-like. "What the heck do you want? The paper?"

"No, sir!" he said. Then he just stood there uneasy and gulped.

"Speak up," I said. "If you got something on your mind, out with it."

He looked back over his shoulder toward the living room and apparently gained strength. "Sir," he said, "I've known your daughter for some time now."

"Two weeks," I snarled. A cold chill was riding up and down my spine.

"Yes, sir," he said. "It's just two weeks, but it seems like a lifetime. I mean," he added hastily, "it seems like more than enough." He began getting red. "What I mean is that—"

"I'm smart," I said, viciously, "beginning to get what you mean. Well, go on."

"The thing is," he continued, giving me a reproachful glance, "that I want to ask for your daughter's hand."

I had the almost irresistible impulse to say, "Don't you want all of her?" But this was serious. It affected me and my wife, my daughter, and besides I didn't want anything to tamper with Alfred's luck.

"What's been going on behind my back?" I yelled.

"Nothing, sir!" he said. "I mean nothing wrong."

"Well," I said, somewhat mollified.

"The thing is, we're in love," he said with some finality.

I glowered at him. "The answer is 'No.' Capital 'Over my dead body.'"

Kathy came into the kitchen. "Stop shouting so," she said. "We've got mother's permission. Linda and Sue are simply wild about the idea."

That hurt me. "Now that you've told everybody else, you finally come around to the old man. Well, the answer's still 'No.'" I folded my arms and scowled at them.

Kathy just grinned and led Alfred away. "Never mind, Alfred," she said. "Just let him growl. He'll come around."

I tore up the paper and went for a walk. Well, after all, I thought, Kathy's nineteen and she'll probably get married some time. But Alfred— I shuddered.

When September came around we were only one full game out of first place. The preseason dope had it that we were loaded and should win the pennant by about

three or four games. And that was just about the way I figured it.

The Bluejays were holding onto first, but they were wobbling. All season long they had been playing way over their heads and now the pace was beginning to tell.

I never saw a manager who didn't worry but, though I hated to admit it to myself, I wasn't as worried as I usually am. We'd catch the Bluejays and win going away. Unless, of course, something unexpected happened.

When Alfred took the mound for his regular stint his jaw was set with determination. He kept throwing me dirty looks to show that he thought I was being unreasonable about him and Kathy.

He pitched a beautiful game. His curve broke as though it had hit a stone wall and his slider almost confused the catcher.

It was a real workmanlike job. He allowed one run, three hits, struck out nine, and walked only three.

Too bad we had to lose, though. The score was 1 to 0.

"Great going, kid," I said as he walked toward the clubhouse. "Swell pitching. It's too bad you got such a tough break."

"Thank you, Mr. Pierce," he said, stopping. "I was wondering about last night. Perhaps you've changed your. . ."

"Get that out of your head," I bellowed. "Just tend to your pitching and forget those unimportant things."

He slouched away, absolutely dejected.

What was it that made the difference, I wondered to myself. A couple of weeks ago he was a lousy pitcher. Lousy, but lucky. And then he begins to improve. Why, today's game was something to write home about.

I didn't have to cogitate long to get the answer. The moment he met Kathy it made the difference. Still, he lost today. But that was because those two kids decided to get married. That was it.

For the good of the team I'd better get the notion of marriage out of Alfred's head. It ruined the guy's luck.

Wally Matson came down to my office in the clubhouse looking glum. "What's been happening to Alfred?" he asked.

I looked surprised. "Why, nothing. It was just one of those things that he lost that game. The boys didn't give him any runs. But he pitched a lovely game, Wally."

"He lost," Wally said.

"Tough luck," I insisted.

Wally lit his cigar and puffed it thoughtfully. "You know with a kid like Alfred, how he pitches doesn't make any difference. It's his luck that we're depending on."

I fingered the rabbit's foot in my pocket. "You can't depend on luck. It's hard work and skill that counts."

Wally regarded his cigar like it tasted bad. "The Bluejays won today. That puts us two games out of first again."

He threw the cigar away. "The season isn't going to last until December. We'd better take over first soon."

The Bluejays lost the next two and we won. That tied the race and when it came Alfred's turn to pitch against the Flickers, we were still tied.

He pitched a great and ferocious game. I had the uneasy feeling that he imagined me standing at the plate and he was trying to tear off my head with every pitch.

Unfortunately we managed to lose that one, 2 to 1, despite the fact that Alfred allowed only three hits. We had a little luck in that the Bluejays lost, too.

We kept pace with them, losing when they did and winning when they did until the final three game series of the season. The Bluejays hadn't been this close to a pennant in twenty years and they were hungry.

Those last three games were with the Bluejays and I didn't like the position we were in. We should have gone into that series two games ahead and breezing home, but in the meantime Alfred had lost two more pitchers' battles.

Things were getting rough at home, too. Kathy mooned around the house, especially where I could see her. She let her eyes get soulful and sad whenever I looked her way. She's got a lot of ham in her and she was slicing it thick.

My wife didn't help either. She kept up the campaign by reading to me aloud from the society pages, concentrating on weddings and engagements. Linda and Sue, thirteen and eleven respectively, thought I was mean, a square, and not a real guy at all.

We took the first game of the series on a nice pitching job by Davis and that night I slept. Then we dropped the second game in a wild scoring battle and my insomnia came back.

Having the pennant decided on the last game of the season is great fun for the fans and the box office, but it's murder on managers. It doesn't have too good an effect on the players either. They begin getting jumpy and hard to get along with.

When I shaved before the last game of the season I saw a stranger in the mirror. He had circles under his eyes and an inhuman glower on his face. But he grinned at me and we were friends again.

Out at the ball park, Carson, the Bluejays' manager, didn't look so good either. When we shook hands, he smiled wryly. "I hope you lose, you bald-headed old horse thief," he said genially.

Back in the old days when ball players were ball players we roamed the outfield for seven seasons together.

I patted his shoulder. "It's too bad you had to get this far, just to lose the pennant. When this game is over, I'll lend you train fare home."

It was Alfred's regular turn and I put him on the mound with some misgivings. He was as cool as a veteran and he bore down on his job like an expert.

He let the Bluejays have a run in the fifth, but it was unearned. However, unearned or not, it put them in the lead and there didn't seem to be a thing my boys could do about it. They swung at the ball like they had broken arms.

I glanced at the box the management reserved for my guests. The whole family sat there. They saw me looking their way and they tossed their heads dis-

dainfully. It seemed like they had been practicing.

Alfred's silence in the dugout between innings was something you could feel. It was then I noticed that the other boys weren't talking to me either.

What a family, I thought. I bet they've been down to the clubhouse putting out propaganda for Alfred. I'm trying to win the pennant and they've got my team working on a romance.

To tell you the truth, I wasn't paying as much attention to the game as I should have. I was thinking that Alfred wasn't such a bad guy. He was built all right and maybe he even had a personality. Kathy ought to know about that.

I woke up as the boys took the field in the top of the ninth. The Bluejays were still leading, 1 to 0, and I had the horrible thought that this was going to be another one of Alfred's superb pitching jobs. He had allowed only two hits in eight innings, yet I could feel in my bones that he was going to lose.

Something drastic had to be done. Take Alfred out and put in another pitcher? No. I had no logical reason for doing that and besides I knew I was liable to get fired if I did and lost the game.

It had to be something that would change the luck Alfred had been having lately. I looked again at the box where my family sat. They tossed their heads in unison.

I knew what it had to be. I gulped and walked out to the mound. Alfred was throwing a few warm-ups and I called time.

"How's it going?" I asked. "Arm okay?"

He slapped the ball hard in his mitt and looked at his shoes. "All right," he said tersely.

I put my hand on his shoulder in a fatherly way. "This is the one we've got to win. I'd hate to think that my son-in-law lost the pennant for me."

He looked up. "You did say son-in-law?"

"You bet. Congratulations and all that malarky."

He grinned from ear to ear. "Pop," he said, and I flinched involuntarily, "Pop, you got nothing to worry about."

Well, I said to myself back in the dugout, Pierce old boy, you're really a genius. The old dome is really clicking. I watched him wind up for the first pitch. Let them hit it, Alfred. Let them have a flock of runs, son. We'll make it

up in our half, you great big hunk of luck.

He struck out Ferguson, their long ball hitter, with three pitches.

Alfred, I thought desperately, don't be good, just be lucky. Let them hit the ball.

Bates, the next man, did. But it was a popup to the second baseman. I would have chewed my nails, but they had already been chewed to the limit.

The third man to face Alfred dribbled a roller to Harrison at first. He scooped it up and stepped on the bag to retire the side.

You should be happy, I tried to console myself as the boys trotted in. But you know positively that we win only when Alfred is in trouble.

Our first man, Chet Mitchell, stepped up to the plate swinging his long bat. He let a strike and a ball go by, then he pounded the ball between first and second for a single.

Anderson walked. That put men on first and second with nobody out. All we needed was one to tie and the crowd began to roar in anticipation.

I sent Jacobs out with instructions to lay a bunt down the first base line. He pushed two foul and then he was swinging away. Jacobs fouled off another ball. With the count nothing and two, Evans, the Bluejay pitcher, took a chance and slipped a scurve across the corner of the plate.

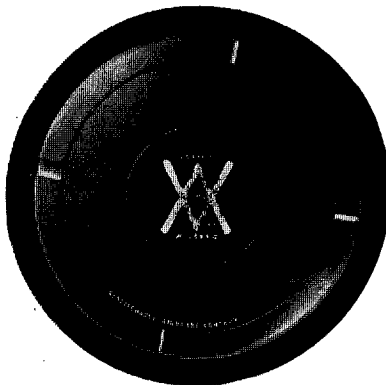
Jacobs knew it was a good third strike and so did I. But he started arguing and I rushed out to back him up. I claimed it was wide by a foot and only a blind and prejudiced umpire could have failed to notice it. It did no good, of course; it never does.

The obvious thing now was for me to put in a pinch hitter for Edwards, a weak man with the stick, and I did. Yates slapped a sizzler down to the shortstop.

I held my breath because it looked like a sure double play ball. But it was too hot to handle clean. The shortstop knocked it down and had a little trouble finding the handle. His only play was to first and he made it with a nice peg.

I pulled the bill of my cap low down over my eyes. It would have to be this way, I moaned. The next batter would have to be Alfred.

If this had been any other game of the season it wouldn't have been hard for me to make a decision. Alfred had a lean .148 batting average to his credit. It



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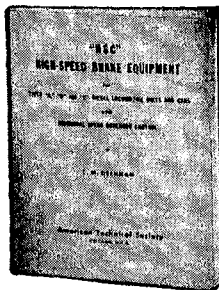
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was obvious that I ought to put in a pinch hitter.

But knocking at the back of my skull like a sledge hammer was the horrifying hunch that I should let him take his turn at bat.

Alfred stepped into the batter's box with a confident smile on his face. The fool, I thought desperately, does he think I'm going to let him bat.

Still, I sat there doing nothing. The boys around me had surprise on their faces and the crowd started buzzing.

I put my hands over my face and began imagining the headlines in the paper tomorrow. "Bonehead strategy of Baldy Pierce loses pennant. Fans want to know if manager is slipping. Movement afoot to replace Badger manager."

Alfred called to me from the plate. "Stop worrying, Pop. Here goes the pennant."

Here goes the pennant is right, I thought miserably. I decided I might as well watch.

The first ball came in right through the heart of the plate for strike one. Alfred started to complain and then thought better of it.

Mitchell on third and Anderson on second took small leads. Evans went through his abbreviated windup and let fly.

Alfred took a wild swing and he connected, but he undercut the ball.

The second baseman and the shortstop started running backward. The right and left fielders rushed in like it was feeding time.

At the crack of the bat, if what Alfred did to the ball could be called a "crack," Mitchell and Anderson raced for home.

I watched the four fielders running for the ball with horrified fascination. They were all calling to take it and coming together like a wreck about to happen.

I guess they should have each taken a corner of the ball, but at the last second each one decided to be polite and let somebody else take it. They came skidding to a stop and with sheer astonishment watched the ball drop between them.

I didn't care what the scorer was going to call that. He could call it a hit or give each fielder one fourth of an error. To me it was as good as a home run.

Mitchell and Anderson had no trouble getting across the plate. That gave us everything. The game and the pennant on a 2 to 1 final score.

The place turned into bedlam and the fans swarmed on the field and the players went wild. I gave the rebel yell I learned in Minnesota and tossed away my box of aspirin.

In a few seconds Alfred was riding on the shoulders of the crowd and they hoisted me up there, too. I saw Kathy forcing her way through the mob and she was heading for Alfred.

I beamed. A couple of nice kids, I thought. Pretty soon, maybe, I'd be a grandfather and in a few years be teaching my own grandson all the baseball tricks I knew.

Then a horrible thought struck me. Suppose they had nothing but girls!

Suddenly I wished I hadn't thrown away that box of pills.